

# AEROSPACE ENGINEERING AND MECHANICS

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## A Tribute to John D. Akerman



J. D. Akerman (with J. F. Piccard seated)

The 50th Anniversary celebration of the Aerospace Engineering and Mechanics Department is focused on the contributions of John D. Akerman, Professor Emeritus and initial head of the Department of Aeronautical Engineering. Mr. Akerman was born on April 24, 1897, in Courland, Latvia, which was at that time a Baltic Province of Russia. He started his career in aeronautics at the Royal Technical Institute in Moscow and as a pilot in the Imperial Russian Air Force. In 1918 he came to the United States and attended the University of Michigan. He graduated with a degree in Aeronautical Engineering in 1925. As a young engineer, Mr. Akerman worked with Ford Stout Airplane Company and Hamilton Metal Plane Company and advanced to Chief Engineer of the Mohawk Aircraft Corporation. In 1929, Mr. Akerman joined the University of Minnesota and founded the newly organized Department of Aeronautical Engineering.

The department expanded rapidly and its graduates contributed significantly to the development of the American aeronautics and astronautics. During the depression, John D. Akerman received federal grants for designing and building, with the help of University students, a tailless airplane, a so-called [Flying Wing](#), which he flew himself in 1940. The airplane is now in the Smithsonian Institution. Later he became deeply involved in the development of airplane oxygen systems, and, farsighted as always, he developed and patented a two-gas pressure suit more than 20 years before the first suits were actually used. The design used an inert gas for pressure and oxygen for breathing.

In 1945, Professor Akerman initiated negotiations with the federal government which led to the acquisition of Rosemount's Gopher Ordnance Works for the price of \$1.00. With the help of federal grants and using the machinery of the powder factory, he developed the Rosemount Aeronautical Research Laboratories which included wind tunnels from the subsonic to the hypersonic range.

"John D's" accomplishments were recognized by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics as well as by the Royal Aeronautical Society of London. Both societies elected him to fellowships. He was the Commissioner of Aeronautics for the State of Minnesota from 1934 to 1937.

He contributed much to the Latvian Cultural Society, which fosters the continuation of Latvian traditions and culture in the free world. John was given the nickname "father of Latvian immigrant DP's."

In 1962, John D. Akerman retired from the University. However, his energy was not exhausted, and he was always involved in some professional activity. His last project before he was stricken by illness involved archeological research on the island of Tobago in the Lesser Antilles.

John D. Akerman will always be remembered by those who were privileged to be associated with him as a sharp-minded, farsighted scientist-engineer and as a very helpful and resourceful friend.

John Akerman's philosophy of life, as stated in a television interview a few years before his death in 1972, was stated thus: "Life was so crazy, but never dull. Many things started, never were done. I want to live more, I want to learn more. Maybe in our time, I will have fun. But if tomorrow, I have to go, I will depart without a mean thought."

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**AEROSPACE ENGINEERING AND MECHANICS**

107 Akerman Hall, 110 Union St. SE

Minneapolis, MN, 55455-0153

P: 612-625-8000 | F: 612-626-1558

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